

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 866

CS 205 066

AUTHOR Shachter, Jaqueline
TITLE Themes and Values in Selected Children's Literature.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 13p.; Guide prepared at Temple University
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Children; Childrens Books; *Childrens Literature; Elementary Secondary Education; *Ethical Values; *Literary Analysis; Literature Appreciation; *Moral Values

ABSTRACT

Children's books by successful writers may stimulate young people to think about philosophical questions, prompting lively discussions. Such books not only have literary value but also encourage children to consider matters central to the human condition. Teachers at the intermediate grade level and above can stimulate discussions of ethical values and moral issues with these four books by Newbery Medal winners: "The Planet of Junior Brown" by Virginia Hamilton, "Island of the Blue Dolphins" by Scott O'Dell, "The Arm of the Starfish" by Madeleine L'Engle, and "The Great Gilly Hopkins" by Katherine Paterson. (RL)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED173866

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN
PRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM
THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGIN-
ATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS
STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT
OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jaqueline Shachter

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

THEMES AND VALUES IN SELECTED CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

By Jaqueline Shachter

With proper direction, boys and girls find it enjoyable to think perceptively about story themes and values. The best children's books by successful writers may stimulate young people to think about philosophical questions and prompt lively discussion. Such books have not only literary value but ways of encouraging children to consider central matters of human life. For those in the intermediate grades and beyond, the values expressed by four Newbery Medal-winning authors are examined in the following literary works: The Planet of Junior Brown by Virginia Hamilton, Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell, The Arm of the Starfish by Madeleine L'Engle, and The Great Gilly Hopkins by Katherine Paterson. Relevant information is added from "Profiles in Literature"¹ videotaped interviews in which each of these authors discusses his or her own values and book themes.

Virginia Hamilton, whose M. C. Higgins the Great brought her The Newbery Medal in 1975, created her Newbery Honor Book, The Planet of Junior Brown, four years earlier. Her only book set in New York City, The Planet of Junior Brown describes the relationship of two eighth-grade truants to each other, to the janitor, Mr. Pool, with whom the

¹"Profiles in Literature" is a series of forty-six interviews with outstanding children's authors, illustrators, and editors that is internationally distributed by Temple University. Six broadcast-quality color programs done in 1978-1979 were funded by the Public Committee for the Humanities in Pennsylvania. Information about this series can be obtained from the author at Temple University, Pitter 443, Philadelphia, PA 19122. Please enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

CS205066

boys spend their school day, and to broader contacts. The truants are Virgil (Junior) Brown, a 262-pound musical prodigy with a neurotic, over-protective mother, and Buddy Clark, a mathematics wizard, whose mother abandoned him when he was nine. For the past two months, until they are caught, the boys have reported in school to a secret cellar room where Mr. Pool has erected a solar system with an outsized planet of Junior Brown.

When a zealous assistant principal traps the truants, Junior leaves home. He is enmeshed in fantasy after a frightening experience with his piano teacher and is totally dependent on Buddy. His disintegration parallels Mr. Pool's forced dismantling of the planet of Junior Brown and the rest of his solar system.

Buddy Clark is the book's protagonist. Duo meaning is given to the word, "planet," for Buddy maintains his own "planet" or sanctuary for abandoned children in a dilapidated building. He is a Tomorrow Billy, a name derived from the fact that the dependent children under his care are insecure and ask before he leaves for work each night, "Tomorrow, Billy?" When they cease to ask, they no longer need his help. Buddy himself had survived from the time he was nine until he was twelve under the guidance of a Tomorrow Billy. Now he is a host rather than a guest in the underground network of planets, where honest labor is encouraged. Buddy, for example, stacks newspapers at 2 A. M. to maintain his planet.²

²Though the Tomorrow Billy concept is Virginia Hamilton's own invention, after her book was published, she discovered self-help networks in large cities do exist.

The Tomorrow Billy that trained Buddy had said, "The highest law is to learn to live for yourself."³ Buddy assumes different values, however, when he concludes, "We are together because we have to learn to live for each other."⁴ He brings dependent, gluttonous Junior to his planet rather than to a hospital, because he feels the obese lad may be cured of his psychological problems if he is with people who care about him. Consistent with this point of view, Buddy unselfishly announces that his is the planet of Junior Brown.

Though the characters in The Planet of Junior Brown are black, the values of Buddy Clark and his mentor, Mr. Pool, are global. The janitor and teacher of astronomy has Buddy and Junior in mind as forerunners when he announces, "The human race is bound to come one time."⁵

In a "Profiles in Literature" videotaped interview with Virginia Hamilton, Temple University philosopher Monroe Beardsley speaks of Buddy Clark as being rich intellectually and emotionally despite his material poverty. He questions if self-reliance is the theme of The Planet of Junior Brown. The author says that she emphasizes survival, and the philosopher replies that Buddy Clark not only gets along, but does so creatively, taking charge of his environment and making it better as a Tomorrow Billy.

Hamilton's novel yields philosophical questions for fruitful thought and discussion. Buddy's activities prompt the inquiry--Is there a conflict between these two admirable qualities: (1) being self-sufficient

³Virginia Hamilton, The Planet of Junior Brown (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1971), p. 73.

⁴Ibid., p. 210.

⁵Ibid., p. 159.

and self-reliant and (2) helping others or being the "keeper" of one's brother and sister? How far should either goal be pursued? Can the two be reconciled as ethical goals? Also, Junior Brown and Buddy Clark are utterly indifferent to the fact that they are truants from school. Does Hamilton suggest that formal education is not important for a useful, satisfying life? If so, is this true? Aren't Junior and Buddy learning a lot? What kind of school would meet their needs?

Even more independent than Buddy Clark is Karana, the "female Robinson Crusoe," portrayed in Scott O'Dell's 1961 winner of The Newbery Medal, Island of the Blue Dolphins. This historical fiction concerns The Lost Woman of San Nicolás who, from 1835 to 1853, lived alone in an island southwest of Los Angeles. The last survivor of the Ghalas-at tribe, this Native American jumped into the sea and returned to her island when the rest of her people were on a schooner headed for the mainland. Eighteen years later, she and her dog were rescued and taken to Santa Barbara Mission, but no one there understood her language.

Scott O'Dell imagines what might have happened to her in her island home. First, he conjectures that Karana's father, a chief, and other tribal members were killed by Aleut hunters, and the survivors were anxious to leave as a group. Next, he guesses that she was motivated to swim back to the island, because she discovered that her six-year-old brother, Ramo, was left behind. Though she herself was only twelve, her conscience dictated that she was responsible for the care of her younger sibling. Little did she know that he would be killed by wild dogs in only a few days, and she would be left alone.

Determined to avenge the death of her brother, Karana wounded the leader of the wild dog pack, but she was bent on nurturing, not destroying. For this reason, she carried the yellow-eyed dog to her compound, nursed him, and called him Rontu, meaning "Fox Eyes." Until his death, Rontu was her constant companion. Afterwards, she replaced him with his offspring and called her new pet, Rontu-Aru or "Son of Rontu."

Karana learned to value other animals beside her dogs. She looked upon the blue dolphins as her friends and had a pet family of birds. When she found a young sea otter wounded by Aleut hunters, she daily brought it two fish and gave it a masculine name. Later, when the otter revisited her with babies, Karana feminized the name.

After she befriended the otter family, Karana developed a value system different from that of her father and other tribal members. She refused to kill the animals who had become her friends, such as the otters and wild dogs, and those who were not, but in time could be, like the cormorants and sea elephants. Instead of destroying seals for their sinews, she ingeniously began to bind things with kelp. When a monk and two otter hunters came to rescue her from her solitary life, she refused to help the hunters find their prey. She acted as if she could not understand what they wanted, though she returned with them to the mainland.

Karana's self-taught values dictated reverence for life, which Scott O'Dell says is the theme of Island of the Blue Dolphins. In his "Profiles in Literature" interview, the author reveals that the book was motivated by his deep anger over the way hunters have killed innocent animals. Previously known as an author for adults, O'Dell wrote this story as his first for young people, because he thought they might become incensed enough to prevent the extinction of the otter.

Children should discuss the concept, reverence for life. What is its basis? Why should living creatures that are not human be valued? Do animals have the right to kind treatment? Why? Is it wrong to kill unless that death is necessary for human life? Is it legitimate to club baby seals for their fur? Is reverence for life or survival the main theme that young people infer in Island of the Blue Dolphins?

Another aspect of O'Dell's historical fiction should be pondered. Karana made a bow and arrows as well as spears, because she was afraid the same wild dogs that killed her brother might attack her. She realized she was defying tribal laws which forbid women to make or use weapons. Though she worried about being punished, she was forced to put aside old values and assume new ones that fit her situation. Children should question if there are times for all of us when it is ethically right to reject or disobey what we have been taught to accept as right and proper in society. If so, what are some modern-day challenges of laws and customs that seem justified?

Scott O'Dell expresses the views of a naturalist in his Newbery winner, and Madeleine L'Engle pursues possibilities with natural phenomena in The Arm of the Starfish. This futuristic adventure story was written two years after her fantasy, A Wrinkle in Time, won The Newbery Medal. The fast-paced story is about sixteen-year-old Adam Eddington who accepts summer work on Gaea, an island near Portugal, with famous marine biologist Dr. O'Keefe. Before he even leaves Kennedy International, an attractive stranger at the New York airport, Carolyn (Kali) Cutter,

warns him against O'Keefe and his intelligent, teddy-bear-like supporter, Canon Tallis. She represents the interests of her father, Typhon Cutter, a man built like a spider, who has an insatiable desire for money and power. Caught in a web of intrigue, Adam arrives in Gaea with Josh Archer of the American Embassy, O'Keefe's ally. Josh records his confidential phone numbers inside Adam's passport for his friend to use in case of trouble.

Once on the island, Adam learns that Cutter has been trying to steal the biologist's reports. The reports concern the regenerative process of the arm of the starfish, and Cutter wants information on how to apply this process to human beings. The lad is convinced that O'Keefe is a true scientist whose experiments will help people. Adam endorses O'Keefe's values and wants to avoid unscrupulous Cutter.

When O'Keefe sends Adam as his courier to Lisbon with a report on the experiments, Cutter tries to intercept it. In Lisbon, Kali Cutter tries to win Adam's confidence by pretending to defect from her father. Adam cannot read her character well enough, so he gives her his passport as a sign of trust. She calls Josh Archer. The Embassy representative, who believes Adam needs him, tries to meet the lad and is killed by Cutter's men. Adam feels responsible for his friend's death, but is guided by Josh's legacy of love, not revenge.

In her "Profiles in Literature" interview, author Madeleine L'Engle says that one of her favorite themes is love versus greed of power seekers or the teddy bear versus the spider in The Arm of the Starfish. She remembers in that book how much Adam and Josh valued each other, and she adds:

If you say to someone, "I'm willing to be your friend, you're vulnerable. You're going to get hurt. . . . When we love, it can be the most glorious thing in the world, but it also can be the most terrible. This is a risk we have got to take."⁶

Children should cite from their own experiences instances when they've paid a price for friendship. Is it wise to oppose a mob or a teacher, principal, or boss in defense of a friend? Does conscience dictate defense of an innocent person, even if there are no friendship ties? Should a peer be blindly loyal to a friend or only when that friend is right? Young people should think about this question personally and in terms of the country politically. Was blind loyalty involved in Watergate?

While Josh's death demonstrates the price of friendship, The Arm of the Starfish has a good-wins-over-evil theme. Children should discuss examples of this same theme in other genres, such as folk tales.

Josh Archer shows his capacity to love others in L'Engle's book. Gilly Hopkins, a foster child, also seeks love--that of her real, distant mother, Courtney--in Katherine Paterson's The Great Gilly Hopkins. This 1979 Newbery Honor Book and winner of the National Book Award was created a year after her Newbery winner, Bridge to Terabithia. The Great Gilly Hopkins describes gutsy eleven-year-old Galadriel, otherwise known as "Gilly," who was deserted by her mother in Maryland when she was three. She carries emotional scars from her first foster placement with the Dixons. She trusted the Dixons, but was left behind, "like the rest of the trash," when they moved to Florida.

The county social worker places Gilly in her fifth foster home, that of an obese, nearly illiterate widow, Maime Trotter, who is raising

⁶"Profiles in Literature" (Philadelphia: Temple University), Madeleine L'Engle, 1970.

another foster child, seven-year-old William Ernest Teague, a remedial pupil. The last member of her bizarre new "family" is a blind, black lover of literature, Mr. Randolph, a neighbor who enjoys Trotter's dinners. Even her cool, knowledgeable sixth-grade teacher, Miss Harris, is a shock to Gilly, and the girl ineffectively tries to upset the black woman in class with a racist greeting card.

Belligerent but intelligent Gilly schemes behind her best barracuda smile. No longer able to love or trust others, she values power. She has developed a protective ability to manipulate others, especially those who show the slightest sign of weakness. Within her home, she analyzes that power over the boy will bring power over Trotter, so she spends time with him and then uses him. She gets William Ernest to help her steal from the blind neighbor's home. She also involves a lonely classmate, Agnes Stokes, who follows her like a stray puppy. "The trick was in knowing how to dispose of people when you were through with them, and Gilly had had plenty of practice performing that trick."⁷ She steals the money to buy a bus ticket to be with her real mother in California.

Gilly never catches the bus, because the police detain her. When the child returns home and the social worker wants to reassign her, Trotter won't allow it. She feels like Gilly's mother, though the social worker reminds her she is only a foster mother. Gilly repays most of the amount she stole and works off the rest, mainly by helping William Ernest with his schoolwork.

⁷Katherine Paterson, The Great Gilly Hopkins (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1978), p. 43.

Gilly begins to feel like a sister to the boy, but before she tries to run away, she makes a mistake. She sends a letter of complaint about her foster home to her real mother, Courtney. As a result, Courtney's mother claims Gilly. Courtney herself visits, and Gilly finds it hard to accept the "flower-child" woman. Too late, the girl realizes she loves Trotter. Gilly has only herself to blame for the final, irreversible move.

In the "Profiles in Literature" videotaped interview with the author of The Great Gilly Hopkins, Katherine Paterson says that the book's theme is: "Life is tough, but there's nothing better than doing well at a tough job."⁸ Monroe Beardsley tells the author that this book and her four others seem to depict the tragic sense of life, a recognition that time and change sweep away many precious things and that joy and love often come to an end. He adds that her young protagonists, such as Gilly, acquire a stoical ability to face up to life's misfortunes, though she is disillusioned about her mother until the end. He also comments about the author's concern for social problems. She reveals that this results from her own experiences, for when she wrote about Gilly, she lived in an integrated area one block out of the city of Washington, D. C. Gilly is an underdog, and the author identifies with underdogs, because she remembers how often peers rejected her as a minister's child from China, dressed in clothes from the missionaries' barrel.

Katherine Paterson wrote The Great Gilly Hopkins after being "a terrible foster mother" for two months. This is how she describes that period:

⁸ Katherine Paterson, The Great Gilly Hopkins (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1978), p. 43.

When something went wrong, and something went wrong many times each day, I said, "I can't really deal with that, because he's only going to be here a short time." I was treating the child like a Kleenex. What worse crime can you do to a child? So I created the world's greatest foster mother, Maimie Trotter, to make up for my sins.⁹

In her intimate account, Paterson makes clear that she realistically developed Gilly. Monroe Beardsley reflects that, at the beginning of the book, the child is a complete egoist in the philosophical sense. She believes it is right for her to do that which is self-beneficial, whatever the expense to others. But she grows into another ethical view, a sense that she owes something to others.

Young people should question if people are basically selfish. Of course, the natural mother, Courtney, is shown to be that way in The Great Gilly Hopkins. The natural mother rejects Gilly, and the foster mother loves and cares for her. Children should discuss if parenthood is a biological or ethical relationship.

Obviously, The Great Gilly Hopkins and other examined literary works, The Arm of the Starfish, Island of the Blue Dolphins, and The Planet of Junior Brown, were not written to serve as springboards for philosophic reflection. For the moment, their literary qualities (poignant emotions and humor, etc.) are ignored. Yet such reflection can also deepen their capacity to move children and will help implant the literature in young minds.

⁹ Ibid.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Monroe Beardsley for his helpful comments and suggestions. He is a teacher's teacher!

Books

1. Hamilton, Virginia. The Planet of Junior Brown. New York, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971.
2. L'Engle, Madeleine. The Arm of the Starfish. New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.
3. O'Dell, Scott. Island of the Blue Dolphins. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.
4. Paterson, Katherine. The Great Gilly Hopkins. New York, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1978.